

Francisco Franco: Strategic Military Leader in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)

A Monograph

by

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The last report of the Spanish Civil War signed by Generalissimo Francisco Franco stated "Today, captive and disarmed the Red Army, the Nationalist troops have reached their last military objectives. The war is over." After a costly victory, Franco ruled Spain for almost four decades, until his death in 1975. Franco passed away more than forty years ago, and Spanish society mirrors most of Europe. However, Spaniards continue to debate Franco and his time. Generations born after Franco's death have strong and poorly evidenced opinions about Franco. He continues to loom over Spain. For instance, political factions continue to argue nowadays about the replacement of streets and avenues related to Franco's regime. Indeed, political personalities use Franco's name or Franquismo to attack their rivals' political decisions. Internationally, Franco generates contradicting opinions as well. The three main political currents present in Europe before and during World War II, fascism, communism, and democracy, have colored today's public opinions about the Spanish ruler. Writers and academics generally express either extreme admiration or condemnation. Consequently, there are few objective evaluations of Franco's strategic military leadership. Moreover, most analyses fail to provide sufficient political, cultural, and military context. Franco provided ample evidence and writings to understand his military thinking. In two representative decisions, at the gates of both Madrid and Barcelona, Franco offers insights into his military thinking. Spanish Army doctrinal publications, journals, and magazines of the time will provide a different lens to analyze Franco's strategic thinking. Ultimately, the purpose of this work is to provide a judgment of Franco as a military leader at the strategic level. In spite of the undeniable interconnection with the political level, there is no intention by any means in assessing Franco as a dictator or his political regime after the conclusion of the Spanish Civil War.

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Abstract

Francisco Franco: Strategic Military Leader in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939, by MAJ Jose A. Aguirre Puig, Spanish Army, 52 pages.

The last report of the Spanish Civil War signed by *Generalísimo* Francisco Franco stated “Today, captive and disarmed the Red Army, the Nationalist troops have reached their last military objectives. The war is over.” After a costly victory, Franco ruled Spain for almost four decades, until his death in 1975. Franco passed away more than forty years ago, and Spanish society mirrors most of Europe. However, Spaniards continue to debate Franco and his time. Indeed, debates over the Civil War, its causes, Franco, and his regime generate passionate debate. He continues to loom over Spain. For instance, political factions continue to argue about the replacement of streets and avenues related to Franco’s regime. Furthermore, political personalities use Franco’s name or *Franquismo* to attack their rivals’ political decisions. Internationally, Franco generates vigorous debate as well. The three main political currents present in Europe before and during World War II, fascism, communism, and democracy, have colored today’s public opinions about the Spanish ruler. Writers and academics generally express either extreme admiration or condemnation. Consequently, there are few dispassionate evaluations of Franco’s strategic military leadership. Moreover, most analyses fail to provide sufficient political, cultural, and military context. Franco provided ample evidence and writings to understand his military thinking. In two representative decisions, at the gates of both Madrid and Barcelona, Franco offers insights into his military thinking. Spanish Army doctrinal publications, journals, and magazines of the time will provide a different lens to analyze Franco’s strategic thinking. Ultimately, the purpose of this work is to provide a judgment of Franco as a military leader at the strategic level. In spite of the undeniable interconnection with the political level, there is no intention by any means in assessing Franco as a dictator or his political regime after the conclusion of the Spanish Civil War.

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Acronyms

CNT	<i>Confederación Nacional del Trabajo</i> (National Confederation of Labor)
CEDA	<i>Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas</i> (Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Right-Wing Groups)
UGT	<i>Unión General de Trabajadores</i> (General Union of Workers)

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Introduction

In the first year of the Spanish Civil War, 1936, the *Junta de Defensa Nacional* proclaimed General Francisco Franco *Generalísimo* and Head of the State.¹ Franco's selection responded to the necessity identified by the *Junta* of naming a supreme commander in order to coordinate the actions of the different Nationalist forces operating throughout the country. However, even before this nomination, Franco had made a significant strategic decision as Commander of the Southern Army by delaying the conquest of Madrid in order to rescue the faculty, cadets, and civilians besieged in the *Alcázar de Toledo*. Historians and others have argued that this decision lengthened the Spanish Civil War. Other decisions became controversial as well.

Much has been written about Franco as a military strategist. Indeed, General Franco has generated and continues to generate very polarized views between his supporters and detractors. Because of this, objective analyses of his capabilities as a strategic military leader do not abound. Moreover, as Lisa Lines suggests in the *Journal of Military History*, historians have failed to analyze General Franco within his own cultural and political context.²

Two years after the delay in the conquest of Madrid, Franco decided not to attack Barcelona, when it seemed defeated. General Rafael Casas de la Vega, when treating Franco's decision for marching towards Valencia instead of advancing on Barcelona, argues the one who

¹ The *Junta de Defensa Nacional* was the organization integrated by the most significant generals who led the coup d'état against the Spanish 2nd Republic in July 1936. This organization assumed the governance in the Nationalist areas until it selected Franco as head of the state. Apparently only two Generals could have threatened Franco's leadership: General José Sanjurjo y Sacanell, who, as the senior General, led the coup, and General Emilio Mola Vidal, who was the ideologist of the coup and commander of the Northern Army. Sanjurjo deceased before the meeting in an aviation accident. Mola had the same fate in another aviation accident the year after, however, Franco's prestige seemed unbeatable, and thus Mola had accepted Franco as a commander from months ago.

² Lisa Lines, "Francisco Franco as Warrior: Is It Time for a Reassessment of His Military Leadership?" *The Journal of Military History* (April 2017): 514.

eventually wins is the one who is right, regardless what theorists think.³ Franco may have been right choosing Valencia, however, that does not mean his strategy was better than the one of the enemy or that he was an outstanding strategist because he won the war.

Analyzing Franco's strategic decisions from a detached and dispassionate point of view, taking into account his education, personal experiences, and the political situation of Spain in the mid-1930s and during the Civil War itself is precisely what makes this work relevant. From an international point of view, this study will address Franco's strategic military leadership, liberating it from the stigma associated with the fascist-communist-democratic polarization that dominated the geopolitical context of that time, and that still today, prevents an objective evaluation of Franco's strategic military skills by the world's public opinion.

Moreover, this work will provide a view from a different lens analyzing the thoughts of other Spanish military officers of the time, in addition to the army official publications and Franco's writings. Some authors have addressed similar concerns; however, they have generally failed to relate Franco's background with his decision-making process and have not gone deeply in analyzing those factors distinct from the strategic movements of troops.

The most controversial decisions made by General Franco within the Civil War have served as a battlefield on which some historians and writers have fought to defend their antagonistic postures. Although some authors have written thoughtful analyses based on previous works, others have used their publications to launch counterattacks against rival authors. A good example of this trend is Ricardo de la Cierva or Casas de la Vega, who reinforced their arguments by negating Colonel Carlos Blanco Escolá's opinions, whose book *La Incompetencia Militar de Franco*, seems not to leave room for doubt about his view of Franco.

³ Rafael Casas de la Vega, *Errores Militares de la Guerra Civil Española, 1936-1939* (Madrid: San Martín, 1997), 224.

A point of agreement among many authors (historians or not) regards the main strategic decisions that shaped the outcome of the Spanish Civil War. These are the Liberation of the *Alcázar* and the Battle of Madrid, the opening and the end of the Northern Front, the offensive in Teruel, the Arrival at the Sea, the Battle of the Ebro, and the offensive in Cataluña.⁴ The analysis of all these decisions would far exceed the scope of this work. Thus, in order to narrow the analysis, the Madrid and Cataluña decisions, which occurred at the beginning and the end of the war respectively, constitute good examples to examine Franco's strategic decision-making and help in determining his quality as a strategic leader within his historical, political, and social context.

Historiography

Historian Geoffrey Jensen, when analyzing the advance towards Madrid, describes Franco as a cautious military leader who needed to establish security before continuing movement. Jensen links Franco's performance with General Emilio Mola's (Nationalist Northern Army commander) interpretation of the war, as a war without concessions. Jensen uses this argument to explain why Franco took almost three months to reach Madrid. Jensen suggests that Franco's decision to delay the advance on Madrid was due to Franco's experiences in Morocco. According to Jensen it was common practice to execute or terrorize enemy soldiers and civilians to discourage insurgencies behind enemy lines.⁵ Jensen judges Franco's decision as a mistake from a purely military point of view, however, he recognizes Franco's political considerations in acting the way he did.⁶

⁴ The Arrival at the Sea refers to the Nationalist offensive in 1938 that allowed to reach the Mediterranean Sea in the east coast of Spain. This action divided Republican forces in the region between Barcelona and Valencia, two cities still controlled by Republican forces by that time.

⁵ Geoffrey Jensen, *Franco: Soldier, Commander, Dictator* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 74-78.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

Jensen addresses Franco's caution again when describing his decision of turning to Valencia when Barcelona seemed to be ready to fall to Nationalist artillery. Jensen argues that Franco's foreboding of rising war tensions within Europe made him postpone the seizure of Barcelona in order to avoid a potential French intervention in support of the Republican side.⁷

Jensen considers the destruction of the enemy army and its support as one of the main pillars of Franco's way of war. Both in the advance towards Madrid, with the complete annihilation of the enemy resistance, and in the postponement of Barcelona's seizure, Franco used his policy of destruction to consolidate his position as *Caudillo de España* (Supreme Leader of Spain) in the new Spain he envisioned.⁸

Similar to Jensen, Stanley G. Payne further asserts that a rapid thrust against Madrid might have delivered an earlier Nationalist victory, an event that would not have favored Franco's personal interests. However, Payne does not provide convincing evidence to support this assertion.⁹ He examines the economic considerations more deeply when treating the issue of Barcelona, claiming that Franco, years after the war, had advocated his decision due to the foreign exchange possibilities of Valencia's citrus crops against the lack of means to import cotton for maintaining Barcelona's textile industries.¹⁰

Brian Crozier uses the words of General Franco himself. According to Crozier, Franco undoubtedly assumed the risk of delaying the advance against Madrid by giving preponderance to moral factors and to impress the enemy by demonstrating the Nationalists' ability to do whatever they wanted, regardless of enemy resistance.¹¹ Crozier describes Franco's main concerns as

⁷ Jensen, *Franco: Soldier, Commander, Dictator*, 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁹ Stanley G. Payne, *The Franco Regime, 1936-1975* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 126.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 148-149.

¹¹ Brian Crozier, *Franco* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 206-208.

political rather than military when treating the Barcelona-Valencia dilemma, suggesting that he tried to isolate Spain from World War II, which seemed to be imminent at this time. He also emphasizes Franco's stubbornness by not accepting any kind of peace settlement from the enemy political leadership, save an unconditional surrender.¹²

Paul Preston offers a new focus, relating Franco's decisions with the intervention of the Soviet Union in the conflict, which delayed the immediate fall of Madrid. He refers to the delay in the advance against Madrid as an opportunity for the Republican side to receive support from the Soviet Union and build combat power with the arrival and the deployment of the International Brigades.¹³

As with Jensen and others, George Hills thinks of Morocco and he wonders if the men of Nador that then Major Franco had had to leave behind in 1921 (following orders from his superior), could have left a deep impact on Franco's mindset.¹⁴ Hills posits that Franco's fixation in lifting the *Alcázar de Toledo's* siege had to do with that traumatic experience.¹⁵ Indeed, Hills finds similarities between the Madrid and Barcelona approaches. He argues that in both cases Franco considered it vital to destroy the armies in the field before carrying out the conquest of Madrid or Barcelona. He suggests that Franco did not want to destroy Barcelona with street fighting or with an Italian artillery bombardment. Hills emphasizes Franco's mastery in managing

¹² Crozier, *Franco*, 279.

¹³ Paul Preston, *Franco: A Biography* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 90.

¹⁴ Franco had to leave behind some Spanish soldiers in a position in Nador due to the superior necessity of protecting Melilla.

¹⁵ George Hills, *Franco: The Man and His Nation* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 251.

some of the contemporaneous principles of war (not necessarily current doctrinal ones) and his learning capacity throughout the war by not repeating the same mistakes.¹⁶

In her biography of Franco, Sheelagh Elwood describes him as a manipulator. Although Elwood does not use this term, she says that Franco manipulated others such as Colonel Juan Yagüe Blanco as an intermediary to distance himself from the repression policy when moving north towards Madrid. Elwood argues that Franco delayed his advance on Madrid purposely because he needed time to establish himself as the Nationalists' leader. According to Elwood a rapid war would have signified a return to his previous life and concludes that Franco had personal, political and professional reasons to slow down in capturing Madrid.¹⁷

Perhaps the most famous Spanish detractor of General Franco is Colonel Carlos Blanco Escolá. Blanco uses provocative language to attack Franco and his apologists, who justify Franco's moral reasons to march towards Toledo. General Miguel Cabanellas Ferrer, the senior of the Nationalist generals, stated that the detour to Toledo established Franco as the head of state and caused the Nationalists' loss of Madrid. Blanco argues that Franco planned it purposely to achieve his political goal. He describes Franco as a politician for whom the military activities did not represent more than a mean to achieve his obscure goals.¹⁸

Concerning the lost opportunity to seize Barcelona and the turn to Valencia, Blanco argues that Franco allowed the Republican army to reorganize after the fall of Teruel, by

¹⁶ According to Hills, *Franco: The Man and His Nation*, 289-290, Franco added a mountainous area to Nationalist Spain, similar in size to the Netherlands, in six weeks, which was a large merit for an army which moved on foot and whose supply system was horse-drawn. "Franco had proved himself a *Supremo* who knew how to handle twenty-five divisions. He had used them throughout in the right place and at the right time." For Hills, economy of force, concentration of force, mobility and surprise, security and leaving the adequate amount of initiative to his commanders, are the principles that Franco mastered in this point of the war.

¹⁷ Sheelagh M. Ellwood, *Franco* (London: Longman, 1994), 83.

¹⁸ Carlos Blanco Escolá, *La Incompetencia Militar de Franco* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2000), 261-263.

receiving support from the opened frontier with France. He questions de la Cierva's statement that Franco postponed the advance over Cataluña to avoid a French intervention, disregarding de la Cierva's reference to a plan developed by the French *État-Major des Armées* (French General Staff), arguing that there is no document that supports the veracity of that plan. Blanco establishes that France would never have intervened, as its leadership hoped to prevent an escalation of hostilities with the fascist countries, Italy and especially Germany.¹⁹ Blanco finally states that the reason for heading south to Valencia instead of Barcelona had nothing to do with the international situation, but with a lack of strategic analysis and a misunderstanding of the operational environment.²⁰

Effectively, de la Cierva, author of several books about Franco and the Spanish Civil War two decades before Colonel Blanco Escolá's work, argues that in the face of a possible settlement of German-Italian forces south of the Pyrenees, the French general staff had developed a detailed plan for a military intervention in Cataluña. De la Cierva mentions German documents from World War II that revealed Franco's fear and that eventually motivated his decision of turning to Valencia so as to avoid provoking a French intervention.²¹ De la Cierva responded to Blanco with a new book in which he reprimands Blanco for disregarding the documental evidence that justified Franco's decision to postpone advancing on Barcelona, qualifying Blanco as an absolute "ignoramus."²²

For de la Cierva, the decision to move against Toledo was not an emotional improvisation, but the ratification of a solid idea, and although sentiments reinforced Franco's

¹⁹ Blanco Escolá, *La Incompetencia Militar de Franco*, 456-457.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 462.

²¹ Ricardo de la Cierva, *Franco* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1986), 238.

²² Ricardo de la Cierva, *Franco: La Historia* (Madrid: Editorial Fénix, 2000), 358.

decision, they did not condition Franco's decision at all.²³ He also responds to Blanco about the Toledo decision, accusing him of disregarding the moral factor and Franco's personal values, concluding that the decision of rescuing the heroes of the *Alcázar* had been a wise move, decisive for the war.²⁴

General Rafael Casas de la Vega descends to the tactical level to justify Franco's decision when he detoured to Toledo. Protecting his right flank for the subsequent movement to Madrid and advancing towards Madrid through two converging roads, Andalucía's and Toledo's, were, in Casas de la Vega's opinion, strong reasons. Once again, Casas de la Vega, addresses tactical reasons to defend Franco's decision to postpone the occupation of Barcelona. Based on the report of Franco's commanders, he emphasizes the heavier resistance in the Catalanian front. In this case, Casas de la Vega also recognizes the concern over French intervention and introduces the Condor Legion, the Luftwaffe unit sent by Adolf Hitler to support the Nationalists. Several of the Condor Legion airframes were not operational due to the lack of spare parts. Casas de la Vega argues that Franco did well turning to Valencia, considering he did not have a strong aviation element and was fighting against a Republican army reinforced from the French border.²⁵

A Lifetime of Strategic Thinking

Because context matters, in order to understand Franco's military mindset during the Civil War it is essential to understand the context in which he exercised command at the operational and strategic levels of war. However, besides the political, social, and international context, which undoubtedly influenced Franco's way of war during the Spanish conflict, it is

²³ De la Cierva, *Franco*, 174.

²⁴ De la Cierva, *Franco: La Historia*, 334.

²⁵ Rafael Casas de la Vega, *Franco, Militar: La Única Biografía Militar del Primer Soldado de España en el Siglo XX* (Toledo: Editorial Fénix, 1995), 357-358, 437-441.

necessary to analyze the most important events, experiences and writings, which contributed in shaping Franco's personality and command style.

Franco was born in 1892 in a traditional navy city, El Ferrol.²⁶ He grew up in a family closely tied to the Spanish Navy. Several relatives, including his father and his older brother Nicolás, joined the Spanish Navy. The relationship with his father, Nicolás Franco Salgado-Araújo, was not an idyllic, paternal-filial example according to biographers. The elder Franco abandoned the family for another woman, something for which Franco never forgave his father.²⁷

A letter published by the Spanish newspaper *ABC* in 2016 seems to confirm the hypothesis of a bad or at least cold relationship. In the epistle, dated in September 1936, Franco's father asked his son for support to solve his ill economic situation, besides attacking the communist current that had invaded Spain during that time. There is not any trace of affection in the whole paper, apart from the initial "dear son," which is merely a formality.

In the letter, Franco's father never expressed any sort of encouragement, which would be natural from father to son, considering Franco's role in the Spanish Civil War. Even worse, Franco's father warned his son of his fate regardless of the outcome of the war. Franco's father offered, "If you win, you will have to enter exile due to the intrigues among the Generals," while "if you lose you will be executed by firing squad."²⁸

Franco's cousin and aide-de-camp during the Civil War, Lieutenant General Francisco Franco Delgado-Araújo, who was born and had lived in the same city as Franco, describes

²⁶ Years later renamed as El Ferrol del Caudillo, honoring him as the current Head of the State during that time.

²⁷ De la Cierva, *Franco*, 31.

²⁸ Juan Fernández-Miranda, Jesús García Calero and Esteban Villarejo, "La carta del padre de Franco a su hijo en 1936: "Si pierdes, te fusilan; si ganas, te asesinan," *ABC*, 9 December 2016, accessed 10 December 2017, http://www.abc.es/espana/papeles-de-franco/abci-carta-padre-franco-hijo-1936-si-pierdes-fusilan-si-ganas-asesinan-201612071859_noticia.html.

Franco's father as a strict and emotionally distant father.²⁹ In contrast, Franco's mother, a loving and a fervent Catholic, was the most influential person in shaping Franco's personality, education, and life.³⁰ This provides the basis to understand the impact of Catholic values, not only during his life, but also on his decision-making.

When Franco was born in 1892, Spain had already receded from the first line of global powers. After two recent failed monarchic episodes, first with Isabella II, a Bourbon queen who abdicated in 1868, and then with Amadeus I, from the dynasty of Savoy, who remained on the throne less than three years (1870-1873), Spain experimented with republicanism. Like the preceding monarchies, the First Republic failed as well, lasting less than a year (1873-1874). Shortly after, General Arsenio Martínez Campos organized an uprising proclaiming Alfonso XII, the Bourbon son of Isabella II, the new king of Spain, initiating a period known as the Bourbon Restoration.³¹ This period, which finished in 1931 with the proclamation of the Second Republic, included the Spanish-American War in 1898. The war finished with the loss of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Philippines and more importantly, it marked the definitive fall of the Spanish Empire, which only retained possessions in Africa.³²

²⁹ Francisco Franco Salgado-Araújo, *Mi Vida Junto a Franco* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1977), 14.

³⁰ De la Cierva, *Franco*, 26.

³¹ Fernando García de Cortázar and José Manuel González Vesga, *Breve Historia de España* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1993), 448. At the end of 1874, General Martínez Campos revolted in Sagunto (Valencia) and proclaimed King Alfonso XII, who had waited in English exile for the recovery of the throne ceded by his mother Isabel II. The Restoration happened thanks to the apathy and desire for tranquility of a demoralized society that was not interested in more republican experiences.

³² *Ibid.*, 360-361. After the loss of Mexico, and Central and South America in 1822, Spain only retained Cuba, the Philippines, and Puerto Rico. The economic and business interests of the United States made their government demand the independence of the islands. Given the Spanish negative response and the subsequent "Maine disaster," fact that today is known fortuitous, the war began. After the destruction of the squadrons in the Philippines and Santiago de Cuba, Madrid transferred its possessions to the emerging American power.

Although Franco was only six years old during the Spanish-American War, it affected him indirectly. His entire career prior to the Civil War developed in the environment generated by the defeat of 1898 and the ensuing political instability. Franco's intention was to apply to the Naval Academy. However, after the disaster in Santiago de Cuba in 1898, the Spanish navy needed to recover, closing the Academy in 1907 until its reopening in 1913.³³ With the navy window closed, Franco changed direction and passed the exam for the Infantry Academy in 1907.³⁴

Franco spent three years in the Infantry Academy. The curriculum that Franco had completed focused on tactics of the three arms (cavalry, infantry, and artillery), logistics, and a deep study of the main trends in waging war such as the Napoleonic Wars, the Franco-Prussian War, and the Russo-Japanese War.³⁵ Three years between the walls of the *Alcázar*, the building that housed the Infantry Academy, allowed Franco to assimilate the importance of drill and the coordinated action of different arms. However, what becomes more relevant for this study is the idea of the destruction of the enemy as the main end of the war and the initiative to accomplish the mission, only limited by the commander's intent.³⁶ Franco graduated as a second lieutenant in July 1910, becoming the youngest officer of the Spanish Army.³⁷

The capstone doctrine during Franco's time in the Infantry Academy was the *Reglamento del Servicio Militar de Campaña* (Field Service Regulations). The importance of the railway

³³ José María Blanca Carlier, "La Escuela Naval Militar, su Origen Histórico," *Revista de Historia Naval*, no. 32 (First Trimester, 1991): 39.

³⁴ This fact overturns the malicious and widespread rumor that Franco had not entered the navy because he was not smart enough.

³⁵ Franco Salgado-Araújo, *Mi Vida Junto a Franco*, 23.

³⁶ Ministerio de la Guerra, *Reglamento Provisional para la Instrucción Táctica de las Tropas de Infantería* (Madrid: Talleres del Depósito de la Guerra, 1909), 121, 147.

³⁷ Franco Salgado-Araújo, *Mi Vida Junto a Franco*, 20.

system for mobilization, the security of forces, and the change in the role of cavalry showed a clear Prussian influence, particularly that of Field Marshal Helmuth von Moltke. Other aspects, also Prussian, such as the impact of breechloaders at the tactical level, command, the orders process, and discipline completed this publication.³⁸ Some of these ideas were not decisive during Franco's time in Africa, where he developed most of his career. However, as already mentioned, Moltke's principle of the annihilation of the enemy's army through battle would accompany Franco throughout his whole military life and especially during the Spanish Civil War.³⁹

Two years into his first assignment with the Infantry Regiment Zamora 8, Franco fulfilled his desire and was assigned to the Regiment Africa 68 in February 1912. This was possible due to the Army's abolition of the regulation that did not allow second lieutenants to serve in Africa.⁴⁰ Promoted to first lieutenant and already decorated for combat actions in the campaign of the Kert River, the army assigned Franco to the *Regulares de Melilla* not long after.⁴¹ Service with the *Regulares* was particularly significant for Franco, due to its peculiar organization and idiosyncrasies, which allowed its employment as the spearhead of the Spanish Army in the African campaigns, until the foundation of the Spanish Foreign Legion, which, as will be seen later, had the greatest impact on Franco's life.

Although Franco had already demonstrated his leadership skills in combat, the *Regulares* offered him a new challenge. These forces integrated infantry and cavalry units under the same command. Based on the French concept, which had created indigenous units for combat in

³⁸ Ejército de Tierra Español, Mando de Adiestramiento y Doctrina, *PD1-001, Empleo de las Fuerzas Terrestres* (Madrid: Centro Geográfico del Ejército, 2011), A-1.

³⁹ Helmuth Moltke and Daniel J. Hughes, *Moltke on the Art of War: Selected Writings* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 130.

⁴⁰ Franco Salgado-Araújo, *Mi Vida Junto a Franco*, 26.

⁴¹ As Casas de la Vega, *Franco, Militar*, 91-92 explains in his work, the Campaign of the Kert (October 1912-May 1913) served Spain to provide a buffer zone for the security of Melilla.

Africa, *Regulares* regiments integrated indigenes and Spanish among the enlisted ranks, whereas all the officers were Spanish. The recruitment in distant areas from the Spanish protectorate had a positive effect while conducting operations because the indigenous *Regulares* had no family or tribal links with the insurgents they were fighting.⁴²

With Melilla apparently secured, Franco requested transfer to the *Regulares* regiment located in Ceuta, participating actively in the campaign of Tetuán. Already promoted to captain, he was severely wounded in the Battle of El Biutz in 1916, when he commanded his company under heavy fire and led it from the front lines. Due to this action Franco earned his second promotion by war merits. In 1917, he became the youngest major of the Spanish army, as had happened with his promotion to captain. This promotion signified the end of the first part of Franco's time in Africa. Franco would never return to *Regulares*, but he would never forget them.⁴³

Franco's experiences at platoon and company tactical level in his first years in Africa contributed to his development as an officer and as a commander. However, a superficial analysis could lead to the conclusion that its impact on Franco's decision-making during the Civil War was trivial. This is wrong. Franco started to understand the importance of morale as he described in his writings about the *Regulares*. Franco's idea of "no wounded or killed soldier left behind abandoned to the enemy" was the keystone for building morale in the *Regulares*.⁴⁴

Furthermore, Franco not only demanded this from his *Regulares*, but also from himself. In an interview granted by Franco and his wife, Franco recalled when he was severely wounded

⁴² Juan Martínez Pontijas, "Spanish Pacification Campaigns in Morocco (1909-1927): Developing Indigenous Forces in Counterinsurgency" (monograph, US Army School of Advanced Military Studies, 2017), 24-28.

⁴³ De la Cierva, *Franco*, 48-50.

⁴⁴ Francisco Franco Bahamonde, "Las Unidades coloniales en el combate," *Revista de Tropas Coloniales*, May 1924, 59.

in El Biutz, his *Regulares* had surrounded him to protect him from further wounds, while others continued the fight.⁴⁵ Franco had been able to identify the power of morale to achieve cohesion in a unit mainly composed of indigenes whose unique compromise with Spain was their salary and not a strong national sentiment. He had used that power to win the hearts of his men, unite them, and lead them to the assigned objectives.

It would not be long before Franco returned to Africa, but before he did so, he experienced certain events in his new assignment in the north of Spain that reflect the social and political instability that reigned in Spain. Once recovered from his wound, Franco joined the Regiment *Principe*, located in Oviedo, in northern Spain. In August 1917, Franco received a mission while there was a national strike provoked by social discontent caused by the imbalance between the salaries and the prices of staple foodstuffs.⁴⁶

Commanding a column of little more than 100 men, Franco had to reinforce the *Guardia Civil* posts in a mining area known as the *Falla de los Lobos*.⁴⁷ However, Franco only found kindness from the peasants and started to admire them for their humbleness. Although the army later applied repressive measures in those areas when the anarchist and socialist unions increased their activities, Franco did not do so. He was already back in garrison when these events happened.⁴⁸ Franco had the authorization from his bellicose superiors to use violence or any

⁴⁵ Luis Franco de Espes, “La Mujer en el Hogar de los Hombres Célebres, el Amor y la Guerra, la Esposa del General Franco,” *Diario Estampa*, May 1928, 19-21.

⁴⁶ Casas de la Vega, *Franco, Militar*, 130, explains that in the specific case of the miners, their wages had increased by 48% between 1914 and 1917, while the profits of their employers had experienced an increase of 650%.

⁴⁷ The Spanish *Guardia Civil* is a police corps of military nature, similar to the Italian *Carabinieri* or the French *Gendarmerie*. Although initially integrated into the Army, the Spanish Constitution of 1978 decreed its separation to become part of the state security forces dependent on the Ministry of Interior, although the Spanish law also contemplates its attachment to the Ministry of Defense in certain cases.

⁴⁸ De la Cierva, *Franco*, 52-54.

means necessary to quell the rebellion; however, he found no reason to do so to accomplish his mission.

Parallel to this proletarian revolution, a military revolution affected Spain's stability as well.⁴⁹ The artillery and engineer branches enjoyed a democratic system within their ranks. There was no promotion by war merits. The army had authorized *juntas* within the technical branches (artillery and engineers) since 1916, which oversaw the enforcement of rules and promotions inside the rigid order of seniority that had been in place since the eighteenth century.⁵⁰ This was not the case in infantry and cavalry, where the reinstated promotions for war merits in 1910 clearly benefited the officers stationed in the Moroccan Spanish Protectorate. The *Peninsulares*, officers with service solely in peninsular Spain, dissatisfied with those benefits, organized *juntas* and pressured the government to attend to their demands.⁵¹ The *juntas* did not achieve their objective and the military revolution failed as did the proletarian revolution.⁵²

Franco, as with other *Africanistas*, was obviously one of those who benefited from the war merits policy; however, when the *juntas*, later called *Comisiones Informativas*, became legal,

⁴⁹ De la Cierva, *Franco*, 52. Colonel Benito Márquez, who had developed the *junta* in Barcelona, emerged as the first president of the *Junta General*. This *Junta General* was responsible for the organization and coordination of all *juntas* throughout the country. The *juntas* movement claimed the abolition of promotions by war merit. The vast majority of colonels in Spain challenged the generals to meet their demands, through an ultimatum provided on 1 June 1917. The Captain General of Barcelona imprisoned Márquez and his *Junta General*. Royal intervention liberated these men and the minister of war acceded to some minor concessions, but the military revolution eventually failed in achieving its primary goal.

⁵⁰ Alberto Bru Sánchez-Fortún, "Para Repensar las Juntas Militares de 1917," *Hispania* (January-April 2016): 195.

⁵¹ Wayne H. Bowen and José E. Alvarez, *A Military History of Modern Spain: From the Napoleonic Era to the International War on Terror* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 41.

⁵² This revolution was composed of three fronts in 1917: the proletarian, the military, and the bourgeoisie. The lack of linkage and coordination among the three wings and the repression applied by the army in Asturias (Franco's regimental area) drove to its failure; however, the instability remained in Spain.

he enrolled in the infantry *junta* organized in Oviedo.⁵³ Not long afterwards, Franco wrote in favor of merit in combat, emphasizing the importance of not losing the positive value of the officer with African experience, which had to constitute the backbone of the peninsular army.⁵⁴

Although there was an apparent contradiction between his enrollment in the *juntas* and what he wrote, neither of these were in conflict. Franco did not object to some measures proposed by the *juntas*, such as the increase of pay for officers, but he knew he was under scrutiny by many peninsular officers because to his stunning career.⁵⁵ Perhaps Franco wanted to demonstrate to his fellow officers his disagreement with certain promotions granted in an arbitrary manner, such as those justified by simply having participated in combat action, but not necessarily with merit. Or even worse, by having good connections with the monarchy.

A counter thesis for this argument could be that Franco had moved for his own convenience, because he was by then a peninsular officer, while when he wrote the aforementioned article he was back in Africa. This argument, which could be embraced by writers who define Franco as a self-interested conspirator, purposely omits the fact that Franco had already supporters and detractors between the peninsular officers. In fact, a significant sector of the young infantry and cavalry officers, members of the *juntas* like Franco, were willing to

⁵³ De la Cierva, *Franco*, 56. The *Comisiones Informativas* was the name chosen for the *juntas* when the government decided to legalize them, in order to exert control over them. When this *Comisiones Informativas*, coordinated officers from different branches, they received the name of *Comisiones Mixtas*. The *juntas* (or *Comisiones Informativas/Mixtas*) eventually failed due to the strong opposition of the *Africanistas*.

⁵⁴ Francisco Franco Bahamonde, "El Mérito en Campaña," *Revista de Historia Militar*, no. 40 (1976): 163-164. Franco wrote this article in May 1920 when he was a major in the Legion but he did not publish it.

⁵⁵ Hills, *Franco: The Man and his Nation*, 101.

enroll in the African units. The difficulties of cousin Salgado-Araújo to return to Africa after his promotion to captain make this fact manifest. He too was another member of the *juntas*.⁵⁶

At last, Franco, who had always manifested his desire to return to Africa, had an opportunity by accepting a proposal to organize a new unit.⁵⁷ In 1920, Lieutenant Colonel José Millán Astray thought of enlisting Franco to help him in creating the *Tercio de Extranjeros* (Spanish Foreign Legion) commonly known as *La Legión*. Not long after, Astray would justify Franco's election as one of his officers because he met the features that every good soldier should have: courage, intelligence, military spirit, enthusiasm, passion for work, sacrificial spirit, and a virtuous life.⁵⁸ The main inspirations for Astray in giving birth to the Legion were the French Foreign Legion and the Japanese code of *Bushido*. Astray had long been gathering support to create a striking force similar to the French one, embracing also the ancient Japanese concept of the honor gained by dying in combat.⁵⁹

Franco assumed command of the First *Bandera* as soon as he joined the Legion in Ceuta, which would constitute the beginning of a military life closely linked to the Legion.⁶⁰ It is difficult to understand Franco without understanding the Legion of that time. It is, just as difficult

⁵⁶ Salgado-Araújo, *Mi Vida Junto a Franco*, 27, 29, 35, 47. After a short assignment as a second lieutenant in Melilla in 1912, Francisco Franco Salgado-Araújo had to wait nine more years to go back to Africa. He had tried to go to Africa before by joining a regiment in Tenerife (Canary Islands), but a planned landing in Ifni (Africa) was canceled. Promoted in March 1918, he incorporated the Foreign Legion in Melilla in August 1921.

⁵⁷ Joaquín Arrarás, *Franco* (San Sebastián: Librería Internacional, 1937), 13. "Major Franco has an extended permanent request to return to Africa."

⁵⁸ Francisco Franco, *Marruecos: Diario De Una Bandera* (Madrid: Editorial Pueyo, 1922), 2.

⁵⁹ La Legión Española, "Historia," accessed 10 November 2017, <http://www.lalegion.es/credo.htm>.

⁶⁰ A tradition that persists in the Spanish Legion is calling battalions by a different term. In the rest of the Spanish Army, the term is *batallón*, similar to the English word. In the Legion and Airborne Brigade, battalions are called *banderas*. The Legion provided most of the officers and enlisted men for the organization of the Airborne Brigade in 1953, which is the reason why the Spanish paratroopers also incorporated that tradition among other ones of the Legion.

to make sense of that Legion without understanding the impact Franco had on it as one of the founders, senior officers, and commanders. The Legion's Creed reinforced the values that Franco internalized while in the *Regulares*. This creed has suffered only minor modifications since Astray wrote it in 1920. The creed consists of twelve articles known as Spirits that acclaim the fellowship legionnaires and their esprit de corps, discipline, and aggressiveness, and exalts dying in combat as the greatest of the honors. That is why Millán Astray used to say frequently “*viva la muerte,*” which means “long live death.”

It is also at this time when Franco began to flourish as a writer. Some of his brief works, related to his actions in Africa, are valuable sources for understanding his thinking. In addition, his articles published in the *Revista de Tropas Coloniales* allow an analysis about some of his chief concerns ranging from tactical matters to political ones such as assessments on Spanish politics in the Moroccan protectorate.

One of the most famous Franco's works is *Diario de una Bandera* in which Franco reviews the most significant events when commanding the first *Bandera* of the Legion. This is an eminently tactical account; however, Franco devoted a few lines to analyzing the reasons for the painful Spanish defeat at Annual.⁶¹ Although Franco had always showed some disinterestedness in politics until he was directly involved in them, he was able to recognize its link with the military campaigns in which he took part between 1920 and 1922.

In spite of the political instability that dominated Spain at that time, Franco excupated the policy-makers of the Annual disaster. He claimed there was a crisis in the values of the

⁶¹ Bowen and Alvarez, *A Military History of Modern Spain*, 43-44. In 1921 General Manuel Fernández Silvestre in command of the Spanish forces in Melilla, disregarded General Dámaso Berenger guidance and moved deeper into the Rif region. This movement lengthened Spanish supply lines making them vulnerable to the attack of the rebels led by Abd-el-Krim. After a series of minor defeats, the Spanish forces were cut off at Annual, suffering at least 8,000 casualties, including Berenguer, in what would be known as the greatest defeat suffered by a European power in an African colonial conflict in the twentieth century.

Spanish officers that affected the voluntary soldier directly. For Franco, the officers should regain their expertise in war and study the enemy instead of worrying about returning to the Peninsula after a mandatory tour.⁶² Franco was only 30 years old when he finished his first work, but as his writing makes clear, Franco's strategic thinking began to develop. Franco once again identified the importance of morale, but this time he went beyond. Franco understood how the successes at tactical level contributed to the achievement of objectives at the strategic level. That is why he insisted it was fundamental to recover the moral values among the officers to achieve those tactical successes.

Franco identified passivity and inaction as endemic within the army as a whole. He emphasized the necessity of abandoning that trend so as not to lose the Moroccan protectorate. It seems that Franco recognized the subordination of the military actions to policy. However, he also advocated the detrimental effects by the intervention of the policymakers before the enemy had been completely defeated.⁶³ Again, Franco showed the influence of Moltke "the Elder." For Moltke, once war had started and the political leadership had issued its guidance, the military commanders had to enjoy freedom to act according their own judgment within the limits and intentions given by the political leadership.⁶⁴

Another important lesson, valid for all levels war, taken by Franco from his African experience was situational awareness. Franco argued the lack of understanding of the psychology of the opponent had contributed to the Spanish defeat at Annual.⁶⁵ Franco, inspired by the French

⁶² Franco, *Marruecos*, 86.

⁶³ Francisco Franco Bahamonde, "Pasividad e Inacción," *Revista de Tropas Coloniales*, April 1924, 4.

⁶⁴ Moltke and Hughes, *Moltke on the Art of War*, 78.

⁶⁵ Franco, *Marruecos*, 86.

model, claimed the necessity of preparing new officers for fighting in a completely different environment. For that purpose, he suggested gathering and publishing the most significant Moroccan habits and colonial problems in publication.⁶⁶

In fact, Franco himself wrote about this topic. Besides the tactics, techniques, and procedures employed by the *Moros* (Moors, Moroccans) and the best way to counter them at the tactical level using modern technology, Franco explained their strategy of attrition and avoidance of conventional engagements with the Spanish troops.⁶⁷ Franco thought this knowledge would increase the situational understanding by the Spanish troops in Africa and consequently improve their contribution in achieving the strategic aims.

Returning to Franco's life events, Astray concluded his command time in the Legion. The vast majority of the *Tercio* considered Franco as Astray's perfect replacement. However, Franco was still a major and the Legion's command corresponded to lieutenant colonel. Franco went back to his regiment in Oviedo when the new Legion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Rafael de Valenzuela y Urzaiz, met his glorious death by an enemy bullet. This sudden loss caused Franco's promotion to lieutenant colonel by war merits and the subsequent command of the Legion in June 1923.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, the political instability continued in Spain. General Miguel Primo de Rivera initiated his military dictatorship. Although Primo de Rivera had always been a supporter of

⁶⁶ Francisco Franco Bahamonde, "Una Obra Necesaria," *Revista de Tropas Coloniales*, February 1925, 24.

⁶⁷ Francisco Franco Bahamonde, "La Guerra en Marruecos, Sistemas Rifeños," *Revista de Tropas Coloniales*, July 1925, 3-4.

⁶⁸ Arrarás, *Franco*, 30-31. The Legion, which had up to nineteen *banderas* throughout the twentieth century, only had six at that time.

abandonismo, withdrawing from the Moroccan protectorate, and eventually ordered a general retreat closer to Melilla, hostilities did not stop sharply.⁶⁹ African campaigns allowed Franco to continue his personal and professional development while commanding the Legion.

In the context of the general retreat ordered by Primo de Rivera, Franco participated in the withdrawal from Xauen.⁷⁰ Although Franco eventually accepted its necessity, it caused a tremendous impact on Franco who blamed the indigenes for providing information and support to the rebels and eventually of having provoked that retreat they now lamented.⁷¹ Although Franco did not acknowledge or refer to Spain's shortcomings in the field of information warfare, he probably understood the importance of narrative as a domain in which he also had to be superior to his enemies.

Franco's action in the retreat from Xauen brought him a new promotion by war merits. The army elevated the rank of the commander of the Legion, so Franco could continue in charge of the Legion, already composed of six *Banderas* during that time.⁷² Meanwhile Abd-el-Krim, the Rif rebels' leader, emboldened by the Spanish withdrawal, committed the audacity of attacking positions in the French Moroccan protectorate in 1925. That triggered Franco-Spanish cooperation culminating with a combined landing in Alhucemas Bay on 8 September 1925.⁷³

⁶⁹ General Primo de Rivera, with his coup d'état in September 1923, reflected the discontent of the military estate before the political situation that crossed Spain. It is striking that the coup d'état had the connivance of the King Alfonso XIII who rejected the political parties by naming General Primo de Rivera president, beginning a stage in which the dictatorship and the monarchy coexisted and collaborated until the decline of this political system. *Abandonismo* refers to Primo de Rivera's preference for conceding the independence to the Spanish Moroccan protectorate.

⁷⁰ Arrarás, *Franco*, 39-40.

⁷¹ Francisco Franco Bahamonde, "Xauen la Triste," *Revista de Tropas Coloniales*, July 1926, 146-147.

⁷² Arrarás, *Franco*, 85.

⁷³ As Bowen and Alvarez, *A Military History of Modern Spain*, 49-50, explain in their work this Franco-Spanish combined action signified the turning point in the pacification of the Spanish Moroccan protectorate and the greatest accomplishment of General Primo de Rivera as a dictator.

Franco had already suggested the necessity of political cooperation with the French neighbors to take advantage against a common enemy.⁷⁴ These thoughts represented Franco's understanding of the political environment at an international level and its influence on the military end state.

The Legion commanded by Franco constituted one of the forward units in this joint operation in which the participation of the navy and the army air force turned vital for the final success. Again, his performance in front of his legionaries provided him a promotion by war merits. At thirty-three years old and with six promotions by war merits, Franco was the youngest brigadier general in Europe. Franco had arrived in Africa in 1912 as a second lieutenant and thirteen years later, he had to leave Africa. He would only return in 1936, to prepare to cross the peninsula with the African forces at the beginning of Spanish Civil War.

Undoubtedly, Franco was a trusted tactical commander. Although some authors have tried to discredit him, putting in doubt the fairness of his promotions suggesting some kind of favoritism or trend based on his prestige, none of them offers solid evidence to sustain that argument. Moreover, Franco was not the only one who benefited from this system. Others such as General Emilio Mola Vidal, one of Franco's fellows in Africa and in the Spanish Civil War became general officer quite fast. Others died gloriously in the attempt.

The time as tactical commander in Africa was over. Franco's experiences in the African War and with the African units, especially the Legion, marked Franco's personality and shaped his strategic thinking. Morale and the moral factor, to counter passivity and inaction, and to succeed tactically toward contributing to the achievement of strategic objectives; situational awareness, as a necessity to understand the enemy and defeat him; and the consideration of the

⁷⁴ Francisco Franco Bahamonde, "Mirando a Francia," *Revista de Tropas Coloniales*, June 1925, 3.

narrative as an element of war as important as combat actions, were some of Franco's learnings during these years.

Moreover, Franco reflected about the linkage between the policy and the military actions, as his writings demonstrate. Franco's writings suggest that Moltke's influence constituted one of the main pillars of Franco's strategic thinking during that time. He had learned that once the politicians had provided guidance to the military commanders, they should stay apart and not interfering in the soldier's job. Annihilation of the enemy was the other principle from Moltke that conquered Franco and would influence his decisions during the Spanish Civil War.

Before that, even Franco's personal experiences during his childhood uncover another feature of Franco's personality that deserves attention. Although not considered by any of Franco's biographers when dealing about Franco's strategic thinking, his strong Catholic belief, transmitted from his mother, also took part in his strategic decisions. The Catholic commandment of loving your neighbor as yourself would provide a human hint to his thinking. It is true, however, that this Catholic goodness and generosity did not appear to be manifest while dealing with the enemy.⁷⁵

Franco's next destination was Madrid, where he received command of an infantry brigade. Although some authors argue that Franco spent his free time cultivating his intellectual curiosity, there are no accounts of the content of his readings and studies. After two years in the

⁷⁵ José María Fontana Tarrats, *Franco: Radiografía Del Personaje Para Sus contemporáneos* (Barcelona: Acervo, 1979), 13-14; José Angel Ascunce Arrieta, "Sociología Cultural del Franquismo, (1936-1975): la Cultura del Nacional-Catolicismo" (PhD diss., Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 2014), 16, 654. José María Fontana, who had certain personal contact with Franco, dared to make a detailed examination of Franco's personality on his work. Fontana defined Franco's personality as contradictory because Franco could shift from goodness, generosity, and justice to cruelty and inflexibility if he considered it his duty. The National-Catholicism understood as the cultural sociology of the *Franquismo* included the "love your neighbor" as one of its values. Although in practice that neighbor might not be everybody; that Catholic value was present in the educational and social system constructed by Franco and his Movement.

country's capital, the dictator Primo de Rivera thought of Franco to command a new military institution, unifying all branches under a single military academy (*Academia General Militar*), a replication of the French model of Saint-Cyr. It was late 1927 when Franco arrived to his new assignment.⁷⁶

After more than a decade of combat in Africa, where Franco had usually written about tactical and strategic arrangements to help adapt current conventional doctrine to African counterinsurgency, Franco now found himself in a completely different environment.⁷⁷ Franco challenged the traditionalism of military education and carried out a teaching revolution, in which rigid and archaic textbooks adopted a secondary role.⁷⁸

This does not mean that Franco despised doctrine. In fact, Franco broadened the doctrinal publication in force, *Reglamento para el Empleo Táctico de las Grandes Unidades*, with comments on the aspects he considered deserving of extension or modification. Those contributions saw the light in 1938 when published by his staff during the Spanish Civil War. Although most of them refer to the tactical and operational levels, some related to the strategic level deserve attention.

The will to win, understood as the sum of faith in final victory, ambition, and tenacity to reach it, is one of those contributions them. Even more representative of Franco's mindset was the superiority given to what he defined as the moral values over other principles of war during

⁷⁶ De la Cierva, *Franco*, 100.

⁷⁷ Franco wrote in the *Revista de Tropas Coloniales* about several tactical topics such as: The Commanders (January 1924), Maneuver (February 1924), Artillery tactical employment (January 1925), Necessities about materiel and fortification (April 1926) or Rif combat systems (July 1925) among others. His diaries, such as *Diario de una Bandera* or *Diario de Alhucemas*, among other publications, offer an expert and detailed account of the necessity of adapting Spanish doctrine during that time to the peculiarities of the African environment and the Riffian enemy.

⁷⁸ Francisco Franco Bahamonde, "Discurso de Apertura de la Academia General Militar, October 5, 1928," *Revista de Historia Militar*, no. 40 (1976): 333.

that time, such as joint action.⁷⁹ Franco emphasized these points due to his experiences in the previous years; however, they were already included in doctrine. He only developed them according to these thoughts.

This doctrine clearly emphasized the older French model of *offensive à outrance* after the victory in the Great War, and had not changed to embrace the idea of methodical battle as the French did.⁸⁰ Neither did it pay much attention to the German penetration tactics developed by the German storm troopers in the last part of the war.⁸¹ However, Franco both evaluated the reforms introduced by General Hans von Seeckt in what constituted the germ of the Wehrmacht's *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*, or combined arms, and the French military academy.⁸² In spite of Franco's study and evaluation of the French and German models, Franco's strategic decisions and operational art during the Spanish Civil War, did not seem to suggest a marked influence from any of these models. In all likelihood Franco's personality and experiences, the initially disadvantageous position of the Nationalist side in terms of manpower, and the lack of a consolidated mechanized force and air fleet, constituted some of the main reasons why the German and French models had little influence in Franco's decision-making.

Franco built his strategic thinking gradually throughout his life and he had certain Prussian influences. Nevertheless, it does not seem that the doctrine elaborated after the First World War caused a great impact in his strategic thinking. Moreover, the doctrine of the mid-

⁷⁹ Cuartel General del Generalísimo, Estado Mayor, *Reglamento para el Empleo Táctico de las Grandes Unidades, Partes Principales y Análisis de las Mismas*, 1938.

⁸⁰ Eugenia C. Kiesling, "Illuminating Strange Defeat and Pyrrhic Victory: The Historian Robert A. Doughty," *The Journal of Military History* (July 2017): 882. The reason Spanish doctrine did not to evolve in the same way as the French did had to do with the lack of mechanization within the Spanish Army.

⁸¹ Ejército de Tierra Español, Mando de Adiestramiento y Doctrina, *PD1-001, Empleo de las fuerzas terrestres*, A-1.

⁸² De la Cierva, *Franco*, 101. Franco traveled to France and Germany in 1928 to explore different possibilities for the new Spanish military academy.

1920s and 1930s did not refer the strategic level as it is conceived today. As an example, the capstone manual of 1925 refers to the attack by internal lines as a maneuver more characteristic of the strategic level than the tactical level. In the development of this concept, it refers to details of the movement of the armies, which suggests this type of doctrine addresses today's operational level.⁸³

Continuing with the historical events, the academy closed in 1931. Spain had an environment of great political instability that ended with the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera to give way to the Second Republic and the exile of King Alfonso XIII. Franco had always expressed his loyalty to the monarchy, as evidenced by his letters to the king in the *Revista de Tropas Coloniales*, as well as the title of *gentihombre de cámara* (chamberlain) granted to Franco by his majesty in 1923. Franco manifested his disagreement with the decision of the political power in the closing speech of the academy.

This discourse is famous because of Franco's reference to discipline "when the heart struggles to rise in intimate rebellion or when arbitrariness or error go hand in hand with the action of command."⁸⁴ Franco expressed in this way his strong disagreement with the political leadership, although he recognized that military discipline forced him to abide by the decisions of political power. In fact, Minister of War Manuel Azaña, reprimanded Franco for such audacity.

⁸³ Estado Mayor Central del Ejército, *Reglamento para el Empleo Táctico de las Grandes Unidades* (Madrid: Talleres del Depósito de la Guerra, 1925), 70.

⁸⁴ Francisco Franco Bahamonde, "Discurso de Despedida en el Cierre de la Academia General Militar, July 14, 1934," *Revista de Historia Militar*, no. 40 (1976): 335.

Eventually, Franco accepted the political change and continued serving the political power in the hope of receiving a new assignment within the army.⁸⁵

The new regime did not calm the political instability characteristic throughout the Bourbon restoration. Rather the complete opposite. Franco, still not happy with the political crisis that devastated the country since the defeat in 1898, remained faithful to his idea of the military subordinated to the political leadership and continued to fulfill his duty at the service of political power. In 1932, General José Sanjurjo y Sacanell, one of Franco's former commanders in Africa, asked Franco to participate in a coup d'état. Franco, faithful to his ideas, declined the offer, remaining in the northwest of the country in command of his brigade.⁸⁶

Still as a brigadier general, he received a new assignment in the Balearic Islands. Franco's aide and cousin, Salgado-Araújo, suggests that this assignment was a way to distance Franco from the heart of the chaos that affected peninsular Spain. Without a doubt, Franco's prestige within the army and some sectors of Spanish society made him a threat to the weak Spanish government.⁸⁷ Others argue that the republic wanted to take advantage of Franco's skills to prepare the defense of the islands in case of an attack from Benito Mussolini.⁸⁸ Both reasons make sense.

⁸⁵ Arrarás, *Franco*, 57. The day of the proclamation of the Republic, Franco wrote an order urging his subordinates to accept the regime change and stay loyal to the new government, sacrificing personal feelings and ideologies, and subordinating them to the service of the nation. Three months later, the Minister of War, Manuel Azaña, who became later the President of the Republic, ordered the closing of the Academy.

⁸⁶ Franco Salgado-Araújo, *Mi Vida Junto a Franco*, 109. Franco manifested that he would only revolt against the Republic in case they tried to dissolve the Army or to implement the Communism in Spain. Likewise, Franco discarded the success a military revolt without the support of an important of the Moroccan forces.

⁸⁷ Franco Salgado-Araújo, *Mi Vida Junto a Franco*, 109.

⁸⁸ De la Cierva, *Franco: La Historia*, 233.

In fact, Azaña had initially thought of Franco as having been directly involved in the failed coup. Although Azaña later realized that his assumption was wrong, in his mind Franco represented a latent danger for the survivability of the staggering republic. Suspicion of *Il Duce's* intentions were also legitimate as suggested by the Italian occupation of the Balearic Islands during the Spanish Civil War.⁸⁹ Thus, both arguments could have influenced Franco's assignment in a certain degree.

Dangerous divisions within several political factions appeared during this period. Groups with similar interests tried to form alliances to seize power, however that was not enough. Both the right and the left wings gathered parties with incompatible ideologies and visions for Spain. Anarchists, communists, socialists, unionists, republicans, monarchists, Catholics, masons, and *falangistas* were some of the competing parties that made impossible a stable regime.⁹⁰ As an example, in the elections of late 1933, a right-wing coalition obtained the victory, however, surprisingly, the President Niceto Alcalá Zamora did not invite the preferred party within the coalition to lead the government or to provide ministers for it. The reason behind this unusual decision was potential fear in provoking a large radical leftist insurrection.⁹¹

Franco experienced this tension personally due to his appointment to the Central General Staff, first as an advisor in 1934 and later as the chief in 1935. Franco, already a major general,

⁸⁹ According to John F. Coverdale, *Italian Intervention in the Spanish Civil War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 127, Mussolini was interested in the Balearic Islands for two reasons: he wanted to threaten British control of Gibraltar and yearned to control the main routes between France's North African colonies and the Italian Mediterranean ports.

⁹⁰ The *falangistas* were members of a political party named *Falange Española de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista*. This national-syndicalist party, led by José Antonio Primo de Rivera, eldest son of the former dictator, constituted the seed of the unique political party during Franco's dictatorship.

⁹¹ De la Cierva, *Franco: La Historia*, 236. José María Gil Robles y Quiñones, the leader of the *Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas* (CEDA), the most representative party within the right wing, asserted in his memoirs that "I did not dare."

had thus reached the highest rank and position within the Spanish Army.⁹² An armed proletarian revolution in Asturias organized jointly by the socialists and two labor unions (*Union General de Trabajadores-UGT* and *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo-CNT*), and a declaration of independence in Catalonia helped Franco understand the complexity of Spanish politics and society, and the willingness of the radical sectors to rise up in arms.⁹³ Franco blamed the weakness, over-tolerance, and connivance of the republic as the main reasons for these rebellions that failed to implement a communist dictatorship in Spain.⁹⁴

Franco himself admitted in his personal notes that “during this period, the commanders who would one day become the pawns of the *Cruzada de Liberación* were selected and the weapons were redistributed in order to respond to an emergency.”⁹⁵ Franco did not write these notes during that time, but much later. Thus, this suggests that Franco undertook his reforms of the army in terms of personnel and resources as part of his duty as Chief of Staff of the Army and no evidence suggests that he was thinking in his political future. In fact, Franco also referenced

⁹² De la Cierva, *Franco*, 132; Ministerio de la Guerra, *Gaceta de Madrid*, Decretos, June 17, 1931, 1433-1435. The Ministry of War had a Central General Staff and Franco was appointed his Chief by the Minister of War. The Chief of the Central General Staff was *primus inter pares* among the generals of the Republic. The abolishment of captain general and lieutenant general ranks in the 1931 reorganization, resulted in major general becoming the highest rank in the Spanish Army. The army had eight organic divisions, one cavalry division, and three general inspectorates over them. Both division commanders and inspectors general were major generals. Lieutenant generals still in active service were allowed to maintain their rank until retirement and could be appointed by the government for the same positions.

⁹³ Hugh Thomas, *La Guerra Civil Española* (Barcelona: Grijalbo, 1983), 155-163.

⁹⁴ Francisco Franco Bahamonde and Luis Suárez Fernández, *Apuntes Personales del Generalísimo sobre la República y la Guerra Civil*, ed. Luis Suárez Fernández (Madrid: Fundación Nacional Francisco Franco, 1987), 11-14.

⁹⁵ The term *Cruzada de Liberación* (Liberation Crusade) was common between Franco and the members of the Nationalist side to refer to the movement of the rebellion to overthrow the government of the Republic.

the trust he enjoyed under the Minister of War during that time.⁹⁶ It may be then concluded that in late 1935, Franco still supported the subordination of the military to the political representatives.

However, new elections in 1936 ended by convincing Franco to do something or change somehow. The victory of the Popular Front or *Frente Popular* led by the former Minister of War Azaña, as well as the significant influence of the communist sector in this coalition were Franco's greatest nightmare.⁹⁷ For Franco, this victory laid the foundations for the definitive implantation of communism in Spain, "a revolution from the power."⁹⁸ Viewed by the government as once again a threat, Franco and other Africanist generals received new assignments far from the capital of Spain. However, this measure did not prevent the *Alzamiento Nacional* (national uprising) of 18 July 1936 in which Franco definitely decided to become a part.

Strategic Analysis of Franco's Decisions

After reviewing Franco's life and writings and obtaining valuable conclusions from the main facts and experiences that shaped his strategic thinking, it is now necessary to analyze two of his most controversial decisions within the war. This will facilitate a greater understanding of why he acted the way he did. Because the purpose of this work is to analyze Franco's strategic thinking, it will adopt a holistic approach to address strategy from different perspectives, not only from a military perspective.

⁹⁶ Franco and Suárez, *Apuntes Personales del Generalísimo sobre la Republica y la Guerra Civil*, 15.

⁹⁷ Thomas, *La Guerra Civil Española*, 177-178. The Popular Front or *Frente Popular* was a coalition that resulted from a political maneuver initiated by the Communist party, which received instructions from the Comintern. This guidance encouraged to act jointly with all the social-democrat parties in order to promote a parliamentary democracy to be replaced by a proletarian democracy when possible. Socialists, Republicans and Communists were the main groups integrating this coalition.

⁹⁸ Franco and Suárez, *Apuntes Personales del Generalísimo sobre la Republica y la Guerra Civil*, 31.

The elements of national power, Diplomatic, Informational, Military and Economic (DIME), and the Ends, Ways, and Means frameworks offer a more general method of studying some of the factors involving strategy. However, the operational variables in PMESII-PT (Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, Infrastructure, Physical Environment, and Time) provide a more detailed and specific approach. This framework also helps to bridge the gap in knowledge addressed by Lisa Lines in the introduction of this work.

General Franco's first decision of consequence took place a few months after the military uprising of July 1936. The initial intention of the generals who promoted the uprising, among whom was Franco, consisted of quickly conquering Madrid, through a series of concentric marches from several directions within Spain. However, the failure of the uprising in several of the regions from which those marches should have started and an unexpected resistance in others, broke the initial plan.⁹⁹



Figure 1. Territories under Nationalist and Republican Control Two Weeks after the Military Uprising. Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), xi.

⁹⁹ José Manuel Martínez Bande, *Monografías de la Guerra de Liberación. Número 1: La Marcha sobre Madrid* (Madrid: San Martín, 1968), 17.

In September 1936, Franco's African forces, which had advanced from the south, established contact with Mola's forces coming from the north, in the vicinity of Madrid.¹⁰⁰ In spite of the slow advance, the concentric marches, although slightly different from planned, had encountered in Madrid. It was then when Franco decided to change the plan to release the besieged soldiers and their families in Toledo. All the authors, regardless of their opinion about Franco, trust the memoirs of General Alfredo Kindelán Núñez del Pino in which he warned Franco about the risk of delaying the advance on Madrid.¹⁰¹ In a conversation between the two generals in September 1936, Franco, addressed moral reasons to justify his decision of detouring towards Toledo.

From a strictly military point of view this decision may be incomprehensible. Franco's detractors and even some of his hagiographers claim that Toledo caused Franco to lose Madrid. But they do not offer evidence, just assumptions and pure speculation.¹⁰² What is not debatable however, is the fact that the tactical experiences in the *Regulares* and the Legion impacted Franco. Franco's identification of the crisis in values, within the army officers, as the main reason for the failures of the Spanish policy in Africa, had evolved into the consideration of morale and the moral factor as one of the principles of Franco's way of war.

¹⁰⁰ Martínez Bande, *Monografías de la Guerra de Liberación*, 65.

¹⁰¹ Alfredo Kindelán and Alfredo Kindelán Núñez del Pino, *Mis Cuadernos De Guerra: Edición Integra con todos los Pasajes Suprimidos por la Censura en 1945* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1982), 44. General Kindelán was appointed by Franco as the Chief of the Nationalists air forces and was one of the best supporters of Franco as it manifested when he advocated the appointment of Franco as the Supreme commander of the Nationalist uprising.

¹⁰² The most shared argument by these authors is that Franco's decision allowed the Soviets to constitute the International Brigades and reinforce the Spanish capital which resisted until the end of the war under Republican control.

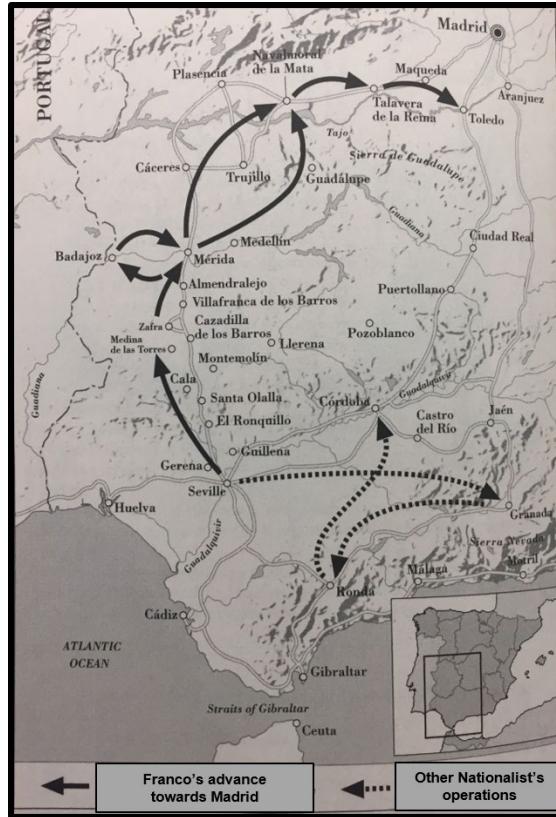


Figure 2. Franco's Forces Advance towards Madrid Including the Detour to Toledo. Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*, xii.

One may now ask whether this decision was in accordance with the strategic military concept of the time. It may be surprising, however Spanish doctrine in the 1930s did not consider the current strategic level. The doctrine of the time addressed what current doctrinal publications understand as the operational level of war.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, contributions of Spanish and other nation's officers in the army's official publications of the time constitute a valid reference to

¹⁰³ As explained in page 26 of the present work. According to US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2017), 1-7-1-8, the focus at operational level is on the planning and execution of operations using operational art, which governs the deployment of forces and the arrangement of battles and major operations to achieve operational and strategic objectives. At the strategic level a nation often determines the national guidance that addresses strategic objectives in support of strategic end states and develops and uses national resources to achieve them.

approach the strategic level and to judge Franco's strategic decision-making in accordance with the military standards of his time.

Those publications, among other topics, were about the main trends and lessons learned from Germany and France, ranging from the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 to the interwar period, as well as the experiences from the war in the Spanish protectorate in Morocco. There was not a unique truth concerning any topic, and that included strategy. However, some details may be extracted as significant, if not strictly representative of the army's general mindset. One of those perceptions is that scientific or industrialized warfare, created by the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution, had undermined the core values of a man of arms commanding an army. In order to recover those values, the generals had to command instead of shielding themselves behind their staffs.¹⁰⁴

Separately, the army writers considered the art of war concept not to be unique. Consequently, it required flexibility to adapt to the conditions and circumstances of the war. That flexibility fostered the understanding of the psychology of the enemy and was essential to achieve geographical and political objectives to reach the war's ultimate aim – the destruction of the enemy's army.¹⁰⁵ In a similar way, as described today, generals had to align military strategic decisions with domestic and foreign policy. A military defeat did not prove those strategic decisions wrong in the same way that a military victory would not mean a sound strategy. However, the interference of other factors such as the perception of the population and the soldiers themselves could destabilize that political-military equilibrium.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Memorial de Caballería, "Función del Generalato," *La Guerra y su Preparación*, November 1925, 503-507. The French generals Joffre and Foch had kept that spirit that helped them to win the war. Based in the same principle Moltke the younger had won the Franco-Prussian War for Prussia in 1871.

¹⁰⁵ José Díaz de Villegas, "Modalidades de los Principios Fundamentales de la Guerra al Ser Aplicados a la Nuestra de Marruecos," *La Guerra y su Preparación*, May 1927, 421, 425.

Therefore, the Spanish Army recognized the trinitarian character that links military strategy with political and social factors. Politically, Franco receives criticism for not separating political and military objectives.¹⁰⁷ Even worse, some authors think that Franco deliberately delayed this advance to gain time for his political purpose of becoming the supreme commander and head of the state.¹⁰⁸ Both these arguments require individual analysis.

Granted that some writers claimed that Franco had political aspirations to lead the country right after General Sanjurjo's death, he did not need to delay his advance for achieving his political purposes.¹⁰⁹ Although not in an official capacity, he was already exerting the role as the supreme commander when he decided to turn to Toledo. As an example, he had sent orders to regions under command of other generals. Franco's orders were executed without dispute from any of the generals.¹¹⁰ Moreover, he personally had achieved the support of Germany and Italy, an enterprise in which other generals failed.

To clarify, Adolf Hitler and Mussolini provided their support to the Nationalist movement led by Franco and not by anybody else.¹¹¹ Meanwhile, the *Junta de Defensa Nacional* agreed on the necessity of appointing a supreme commander. Franco's election, not only as

¹⁰⁶ J.C. Guerrero, "Los Grandes Caudillos de la Guerra Mundial," *La Guerra y su Preparación*, December 1929, 297-301.

¹⁰⁷ Lines, "Francisco Franco as Warrior," 514.

¹⁰⁸ As mentioned in the historiography, Payne and Elwood support this idea.

¹⁰⁹ Julián Casanova, *A Short History of the Spanish Civil War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 25. The main coup participants appointed General Sanjurjo head of the rebellion. Two days after this declaration, on return from exile in Portugal, a plane crash left the military uprising without a leader. Instead of choosing another one, the generals agreed to create the *Junta de Defensa Nacional*. The *Junta* exerted as coordinating body presided by General Cabanellas, however, there was no commander. Instead, Mola and Franco, commanders of the main forces converging upon Madrid contacted regularly and coordinated with each other.

¹¹⁰ Néstor Cerdá, "Political Ascent and Military Commander: General Franco in the Early Months of the Spanish Civil War, July-October 1936," *The Journal of Military History* (October 2011): 1139.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1139. Franco moved airplanes from an aerodrome in General Mola's area of responsibility to the southern front.

supreme commander, but also as head of the state, seemed the only option. Although there was a timid opposition from General Cabanellas, there was no candidate that could threaten Franco's leadership. Previous criticism of Franco's initial actions in the first days of the uprising did not interfere in Franco's election. The situation had changed drastically since those critiques had taken place.¹¹²

According to Stanley G. Payne and Jesús Palacios, Franco did not have a plan to become the Nationalist's leader, and the events in September 1936 transpired due to the circumstances and his supporters, "which at times may have surprised even him". Franco described a confusing totalitarian rule in his investiture discourse, however "it would be probably wrong to conclude that he had assumed that he would be dictator for life."¹¹³ This reinforces the argument that there was no direct relationship between Franco's ideology or political ambitions and the strategic decision to liberate the *Alcázar*.

Furthermore, it is likely that Franco perceived the political alternatives to his leadership as ill-equipped to seize political control of the country. In fact, none of the options offered by the Republic had worked very well in the previous years. The right wing had not had the courage to face the left-wing parties in 1933, in spite of their electoral victory. The assassination of the extreme right-wing leader José Calvo Sotelo in 1936 frustrated the right-wing insurrection's efforts and eventually provoked Franco into joining the military uprising, even though he had his previous doubts over it.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Cerdá, "Political Ascent and Military Commander," 1136. General Queipo de Llano had criticized Franco's absence in the Peninsula the first two weeks of the war. Franco was in Tetuán trying to look for a solution to cross the strait with his African forces. The naval blockade established by the Republican navy impeded an amphibious landing in the locations planned initially but German and Italian military support made it possible.

¹¹³ Stanley G. Payne and Jesús Palacios, *Franco: A Personal and Political Bibliography* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 135, 146-47.

¹¹⁴ Franco Salgado-Araújo, *Mi Vida Junto a Franco*, 150.

The *Frente Popular*, victorious in the last elections before the war (1936), had demonstrated its inability to stabilize the country. In fact, the irruption of the communist movement within their rank nullified more moderate sectors of the left wing, resulting in a lack of governmental control and violence against conservatives and the church. Consequently, the republic slowly succumbed to the growing influence of communism in Spain when the war broke out. Monarchy was not a solid option either. In truth, Spain was undergoing a similar process that had already occurred in other European monarchies following the aftermath of World War I. However, Spain's neutrality during the Great War had distanced it from the general trend in the rest of Europe, although just temporally.

This trend addressed how some European monarchies had decayed precipitously or had been overthrown after World War I. Subsequent democratic attempts had not worked in some of those countries, such as Germany. The lack of democratic consensus had led to authoritarian regimes in which communism or fascism recovered the old absolutist powers once held by monarchies.¹¹⁵ The Spanish monarchy had managed to survive during the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. However, the proclamation of the Second Republic (1931) marked the end of monarchy for a long time.¹¹⁶

Thus, although with delay, Spain had followed a similar pattern, and communism propelled by the Soviet Comintern seemed to be the final outcome.¹¹⁷ As Franco had already assured Sanjurjo in 1932, when he declined his offer to participate in a coup, he would only rise up against the established power in case of the implementation of communism within Spain.

¹¹⁵ Casanova, *A Short History of the Spanish Civil War*, 13-14.

¹¹⁶ Thomas, *La Guerra Civil Española*, 53. Monarchy would not return to Spain until 1975 when Juan Carlos assumed the throne after Franco's death.

¹¹⁷ Edward Hallett Carr, *The Comintern and the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 1. The Comintern held its 7th Congress in 1935, at which time its leadership agreed to enter effectively in the Spanish politics.

Franco perceived that this was precisely what was happening. Franco, therefore, acted according to his strong convictions and unlike the other generals constituting the *Junta de Defensa Nacional*, Franco had two advantages: charisma and leadership over the rest, and a clear political idea to face communism supported by the structure of a political party to act as the mechanism of a new regime, *Falange*.¹¹⁸

With regard to the separation of political and military objectives, Franco did not need to separate them because he considered them the same. He did not have a political counterpart to provide a military endstate to enable the termination of the conflict. Although Franco might not have been a military genius, he encompassed both, political and military leadership. He was both Bismarck and Moltke. He was Napoleon. He was Frederick the Great.

Moreover, due to his education and professional experience, Franco had internalized the annihilation of the enemy as the ultimate aim of the war. Although, he expected to be in Madrid eight days after lifting the siege of the *Alcázar*, he failed in his predictions. The incorporation of the International Brigades helped the enemy build overwhelming combat power.¹¹⁹ He still had to annihilate them; this was not a concern for Franco. Was that a strategic mistake in the context of the Spanish military mindset of the time? Probably yes. Franco assumed the risk of delaying the advance on Madrid, acknowledging that he could lose it when, at the moment, it seemed an easy

¹¹⁸ Luis Suárez Fernández, *Franco: Los Años Decisivos, 1931-1945* (Barcelona: Editorial Ariel, 2011), 81. Unlike in other European countries, such as Germany or Russia, where the Nazi Party or the Communist Party respectively exerted the totalitarianism of the state, presenting themselves as the only form of liberty, Franco did not allow *Falange* to present itself as the identity of the Nationalist movement. For Franco, the state was totalitarian and not the party. Franco considered its regime had capacity to evolve and only the historical integrity of Spain and the fundamental principles of the catholic religion were undisputable.

¹¹⁹ R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 97. "Between November 1936 and March 1937 the defense of Madrid defended heavily on manpower of the International Brigades," reaching between fifteen and twenty thousand soldiers in early 1937.

target. Thus, it is clear that he failed at assuming calculated risk because the annihilation of the enemy was going to take longer than expected.

However, Franco knew it and he did not care. Although the moral factor was Franco's response for such decision, another one of the operational variables brings to light another pillar of Franco's way of war. The informational domain was key for Franco as it shows the recognition of the narrative during his African experiences. Thus, Franco utilized the *Alcázar* liberation and the epic narrative derived from it as a strategic information operation to influence the morale of both his forces and supporters as well that of his enemy. Not only that, Franco, aware of the transcendence of the Spanish conflict all over the world, possibly considered gaining international support and acceptance. Thus, Franco recognized the perception of the population, the soldiers, and the international community as a tool to tip the scales of the political-military equilibrium in his favor. As an example, Col. Stephen O. Fuqua, the US military attaché in Madrid from 1933 until his mandatory retirement in 1938, personally visited Toledo and saw the *Alcázar*, some days before its liberation by the Nationalist forces. Although Fuqua reported mostly about the Republicans, he clearly admired the Nationalists. This suggests that his reports concerning the "Siege of the *Alcázar*," may have been favorable for Franco's interest.¹²⁰

Two years later, in April 1938, Madrid continued in the enemy's hands. In fact, Madrid would be Republican until the end of the war. Franco, who had been supreme commander for more than two years, had the opportunity to capture the second city of Spain, Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia. Catalonia was strategically important because it allowed complete Nationalist control of the frontier with France and the city's port, disrupting the ability of the enemy to receive supplies and support from its allies in Europe. However, like in Madrid, when

¹²⁰ James W. Cortada, *Modern Warfare in Spain* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2012), xxiii, 25, 324.

Nationalist forces were in position to seize the city, Franco decided to turn south towards Valencia, another Republican city, important, but in any case, as important as Barcelona.

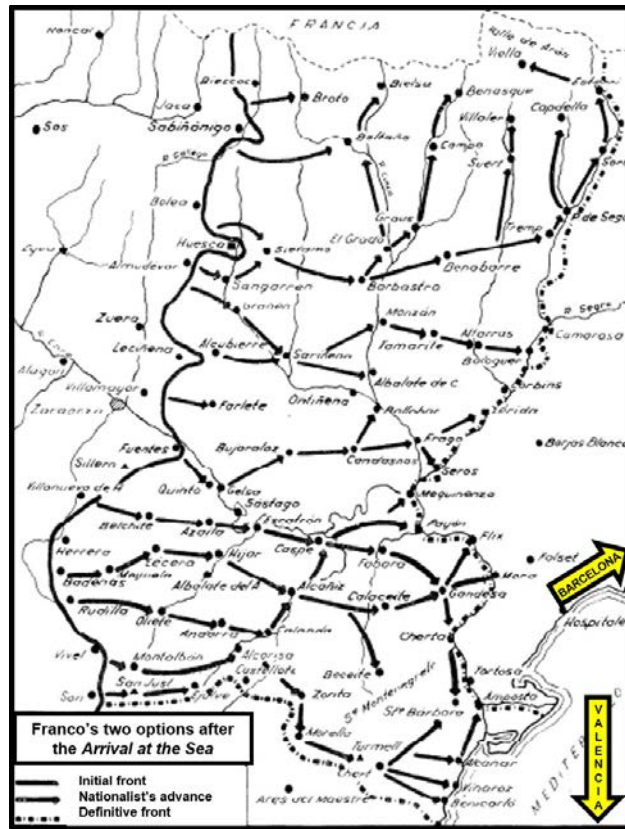


Figure 3. Franco’s Two Options after the Arrival at the Sea. Barcelona and Valencia. Redacción, “Incidencias en la Lucha (Síntesis de las Operaciones Militares),” *Revista de Historia Militar*, no. 17 (1964): 196.

The vast majority of authors argue that Franco’s decision had to do with his assessment of France’s potential intervention in support of the Republican side should Nationalist forces deploy close to the border with France. The other argument is the economic necessity. As Payne argues, Franco effectively declared in 1957 that he had not been in a hurry to occupy Barcelona due to his economic incapacity to provide cotton to the Catalonian industries while Valencia

offered him citrus fruits for exportation.¹²¹ Although Franco was probably telling the truth, this argument seems insufficient to justify that apparently weird strategic decision.

In fact, the economic side was not Franco's main concern during the war. In contrast with the Republican instability, the Nationalists kept the same minister of the treasury (initially named director of the commission of the treasury) during the whole war, which was definitely a sign of continuity. Nationalists' measures to sustain the war economically worked well from the beginning of the war with internal actions such as taxation, advance payment from the *Banco de España*, blocking bank accounts, controlling the salaries of the public workers, and private investments. Franco's ability to achieve the support of Italy and Germany yielded the Nationalists between 640 and 700 million dollars in a war which the total cost ranged from 607 to 716 million dollars. Not only did the Nationalists have steady revenue, but the loans taken during the war did not constitute a problem because they did not have to be paid until after the war.¹²²

This evidence dismantles in part Franco's argument of the essential necessity of Valencia's citrus fruit exportation as the main reason for the strategic turn to Valencia. The context of the conversation in which Franco asserted that necessity dealt with the impatience of the people with the government in 1957.¹²³ It is likely that on that occasion, Franco, influenced by the popular impatience, was unconsciously falling victim to his narrative during the war qualifying the Nationalist victory as a miracle despite great economic difficulties. However, the data suggest that this was not the case.

¹²¹ Francisco Franco Salgado-Araújo and Francisco Franco, *Mis Conversaciones Privadas con Franco* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1976), 262. Franco also recognized that he had dedicated the same efforts to both the direction of the war and the economic efforts, in order to avoid the starvation of the Spanish people after the expected victory.

¹²² María Ángeles Pons, "Hacienda y Finanzas durante la Guerra Civil" (presentation, Universidad de Valencia, 2006), 33-43.

¹²³ Franco Salgado-Araújo and Franco, *Mis Conversaciones Privadas con Franco*, 201-202.

Despite the focus on economic reasons given by Franco, some authors argue the French military intervention in support of the Republicans represented the most critical reason for Franco's decision. Nevertheless, none of Franco's biographers include the French plan in their bibliographies. Even de la Cierva, who passionately advocates its existence. De la Cierva was right, that plan actually existed. In 1935, the French General Staff created the plan *Dbis* (an update of a previous plan named D) to counter a combined attack from both Germany and Italy among other contingencies. The events of the Spanish Civil War also caused the French *État-Major des Armées* (French General Staff) to consider a branch plan to *Dbis* (plan *P*), whereby Spanish nationalists would attack through the Pyrenees supported by Germany. Consequentially, in 1938, the French High Command recognized Germany and Italy as the main adversaries – Japan and Spain were secondary.¹²⁴

In a secret meeting conducted in March 1938, disagreements between the political and military leadership, Prime Minister Leon Blum and General Maurice Gamelin, led to the decision of not intervening in Spain to avoid a general engagement with Germany and Italy. However, the French press, which was aware of the meeting, published an inaccurate version of events, stating that five French divisions were going to intervene in Catalonia. However, the accurate records of the meeting arrived to the *Generalísimo*'s headquarters. This information potentially led to Franco's decision of not deploying Nationalist forces to reinforce the border with France.¹²⁵

Nevertheless, Nationalists continued distrusting France, as shown in a letter from Colonel Antonio Barroso y Sánchez Guerra to the *Generalísimo* in June 1939. Discussing the recuperation of the war material moved by the Spanish Republicans to France, the colonel explained to Franco

¹²⁴ Jaime Martínez Parrilla, *Las Fuerzas Armadas Francesas ante la Guerra Civil Española (1936-1939)* (Madrid: Servicio de Publicaciones del EME, 1988), 160-162.

¹²⁵ Parrilla, *Las Fuerzas Armadas Francesas ante la Guerra Civil Española*, 191-192.

that General Gamelin had ensured him that the French General Staff had always opposed an intervention in the Spanish conflict. Although that was basically true, it was also true that France had not intervened because Gamelin had suggested that France did not have enough forces to deal with all of France's enemies. Thus, French political leadership had reluctantly preferred to be conservative and avoid provoking Germany and Italy by not supporting the Spanish Popular Front.¹²⁶

Franco did not make a last-minute decision. In 1937, almost a year before being at the gates of Barcelona, he was aware of French intentions. A report from one Nationalist agent in Paris taught Franco that France had concerns about the French-Spanish border. The French armed forces had performed high-scale military maneuvers close to the border, staging a permanent force estimated at 25,000-30,000 men. This was all with the purpose of preparing for an intervention south of the Pyrenees. The report even asserted that France had been close to intervention and only British opposition had stopped France.¹²⁷

British pressure on France was just the last link of a chain of strategic decisions that concerned the main European powers in the second half of the 1930s. The final result of that chain had important consequences in the conflict between Spanish compatriots, in terms of international support. In short, in 1936 France had adopted a non-intervention policy with regards to the Spanish Civil War because the government feared losing British support in case of a European general conflict.¹²⁸ Britain needed the Spanish side of Gibraltar and the Balearic and

¹²⁶ Francisco Franco and Fundación Nacional Francisco Franco, *Documentos Inéditos para la Historia del Generalísimo Franco* (Madrid: Fundación Nacional Francisco Franco, 1992), 523-524. Colonel Barroso was the Spanish military attaché in Paris once the Nationalist government was officially recognized by France.

¹²⁷ Report sent by one of the Nationalists agents in Paris, Gonzalo Navacarreda, document 3748, 12 October 1937, Fundación Nacional Francisco Franco.

¹²⁸ Michael Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 45.

Canary Islands to stay under Spanish Nationalist control in order to safeguard Mediterranean Sea lines of communication. Britain reduced the risk of a subsequent Franco-Soviet pact by not supporting an alliance between France and the Spanish Republican. This meant that Germany and Italy did not feel surrounded by hostile regimes, thus war would be less likely and the Mediterranean route safe.¹²⁹

Having clarified the origins of Franco's concerns regarding France, it is also necessary to address its consequences. The Battle of the Ebro River, which occurred months later, was the bloodiest engagement in the Spanish Civil War. Franco's decision to move towards Valencia gave the Spanish Republican Army time to reorganize. Moreover, the border with France remained open and under Republican control, allowing Republican Army to continue receiving support and conduct the great offensive leading to the Battle of the Ebro. Although Nationalist forces obtained the victory, casualties were staggering on both sides.

Some authors criticize Franco's strategic decision, stating that if he had seized Barcelona first he would have avoided the blood bath and still won the war. Incomprehensibly, these authors disregard or ignore the risk of a French intervention. In 1938, circumstances had changed since the approval of plan *P* in 1935 and the first meeting of the International Committee for the Application of the Agreement for Non-Intervention in Spain in 1936. In fact, Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union had been participating in the conflict since the beginning, which nullified the weak Non-Intervention agreement. France had other reasons not to intervene, but it is also reasonable to believe that in such a changing environment, as the one that reigned in a prewar Europe, Franco could have thought that the European strategic interconnections made a French intervention possible.

¹²⁹ Alpert, *A New International History of the Spanish Civil War*, 16.

When assessing Franco's decision in the context of the late 1930's army publications, he put into practice what most of his contemporaneous officers thought as proper strategic decision-making. First, Franco, although he listened to his subordinates before making this decision, exerted a firm generalship deciding by himself, as it is evident in the disagreement of his main collaborators.¹³⁰ Moreover, Franco matched his military decision with a foreign policy related to the French threat. Whether France would have intervened or not, is irrelevant to Franco's decision to seize Barcelona and if it was strategically right or wrong.

What is relevant is that Franco analyzed foreign policy factors besides purely military ones, and made a decision based on a possibility that could have changed the final outcome of the war. Although Franco did not expect the Republican counteroffensive that led to the Battle of the Ebro, he took advantage of it to materialize his strategic concept, which was the annihilation of the enemy's army at all costs.¹³¹ This matched with the posture of the Spanish military writers, who considered the annihilation of the enemy as the last aim of the war. Franco did not want to finish the war soon, but to finish the war after annihilating the Republican Army.

Conclusion

Franco made reasonable decisions during the Spanish Civil War. He was a professional soldier with vast combat experience. It is true that the kind of war he experienced in Africa when facing Rif guerrillas was very different from the Spanish Civil War, in which the conventional warfare was the norm. It is also true that Franco was a novice in commanding large units, such as the Army of the South and Africa or the entire Nationalist force. Franco's detractors use these arguments to support their negative view of Franco as a strategic leader.

¹³⁰ Kindelán and Kindelán Núñez del Pino, *Mis Cuadernos de Guerra*, 140.

¹³¹ Juan Blázquez Miguel, *Auténtico Franco: Trayectoria Militar, 1907-1939* (Madrid: Almena Ediciones, 2009), 299.

Franco exerted command in combat from lieutenant to colonel, something that others could not do or did not want to do. Although that experience in itself made Franco neither a sound strategist nor a military genius, it constituted the best experience a Spanish general could have. Many of the generals and commanders of large units who participated in the Spanish Civil War had this kind of experience. However, none of them had Franco's accolades, gained from always fighting alongside the *Regulares* and Legion on the missions of greatest risk and fatigue.

Franco's detractors fall in the mistake of making a simplistic analysis of Franco's tactical experience, failing or not wanting to understand the linkage with the strategic level materialized by the lessons that shaped Franco's strategic thinking. The importance of the moral factor and morale, the psychological domain of the war in terms of situational understanding, and the importance of the narrative are critical to understand Franco's strategic thinking. Jensen and others have addressed the primacy of the moral factors in Franco's decision-making, however, it was not just Franco's African experience.

The Catholic influence exerted by his mother constituted the base on which settled the values of the *Regulares* and especially of the Legion. A comparison between the Catholic maxim of love of the neighbor and the fellowship until death typical to African units seems apparent. Franco's discrepancies with his army fellows in terms of promotion by war merits also contributed to shaping Franco's moral consciousness, sense of justice, and fellowship. Moreover, closer contact with the political leadership in Madrid from which he could witness the instability of the political environment, and last but not least, the emergence of the communist current within the left-wing ranks caused Franco's concern. In short, aside from his African experience, all these factors shaped Franco's moralistic side to his decision-making within the Civil War.

Being more specific, Franco's decision to delay the advance over Madrid had to do with moral reasons. In fact, that is the reason that Franco himself asserted. Conjectures about the

linkage of this decision with Franco's political interests to lead the country are exactly that, conjectures. In fact, when this event happened he was the *de facto* supreme commander and others, not himself, fostered his appointment as supreme commander and head of the state. Of course, this is not in conflict with Franco's personal motivations. But, Franco's military and political ambition, even in case they existed, did not drive his decision.

The preponderance of moral factors in Franco's strategic thinking was not the norm. In other words, the moral factor, although important, as publications of the time make manifest, was not the main factor in decision-making. Franco clearly identified the danger in delaying the conquest of Madrid, but he subordinated Madrid to his obligation of liberating the Nationalist soldiers and their families besieged in the *Alcázar de Toledo*. However, Franco understood the essence of strategy in the same way as his fellow Spanish officers did. Although the Spanish Army did not have an institutionalized concept of the strategic level, the writings of army officers reveal that Franco's actual performance within the Spanish Civil War aligned with those written ideas. A strong generalship, flexibility to adapt to the changing circumstances of the strategic environment and the annihilation of the enemy's army as the ultimate aim of the war are some significant examples.

Another one of those ideas that Franco put into practice was the consideration of foreign policy events when making military decisions. That is precisely what moved Franco to delay the advance towards Barcelona. Again, Franco's detractors argue that France was not going to intervene, in case of Nationalist forces dominate the whole border with France.¹³² None of these authors offer clear evidence to ensure that assertion. Because of the political and strategic

¹³² According to Carlos Engel, *Estrategia y Táctica en la Guerra de España, 1936-1939* (Madrid: Almena, 2008), 239, Franco already controlled half of the border with France when this decision moment took place. The fact that France had not intervened yet, did not ensure that they could not if the Nationalist forces continued their expansion along the international boundary.

interdependence amongst the main European powers, the competing interests that converged in the Spanish conflict, and the disconnection in France between the political and military leadership, it is reasonable to think that France could eventually have decided to intervene in support of the Republican side, sending troops to the Iberian Peninsula.

In summary, Franco's strategic thinking within the Spanish Civil War corresponded with the standards of the time. However, Franco gave preponderance to his whole-life-shaped moral factor as the main driver of his strategic decision-making at the gates of Madrid, even at the cost of lengthening the war, which, in a certain way, was irrelevant. The annihilation of the enemy's army was the ultimate aim of the war for Franco and for his Spanish contemporaries. The time frame in which to achieve this goal was secondary.

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